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## Arabic Travel Literature

Daniel L. Newman

Arabic travel writing boasts a varied history that goes back some twelve centuries. This chapter will focus on its key developments, typology and salient themes. The emergence of the genre is bound up with the importance of travel in Islam. In the Qur'an, travel often appears as a duty, whether in respect of the pilgrimage or, simply, to 'see how God originated creation' (Qur. 29:20). In addition, travel was vital in the quest for knowledge (*ṭalab al-ʿilm*), and an obligatory rite of passage for any would-be scholar, to consult libraries or to study under famous teachers. One of the most famous sayings (*ḥadīth*) of the Prophet in this respect instructed believers to seek knowledge 'even if it is in China' (*uṭlub al-ʿilm wa law bi 'l-Šīn*). It is a Qur'anic term for travel or journey, *riḥla*, which early on also came to denote a travelogue.

The etiology of travel, then, combined both piety and education, within an established epistemological framework, and took place primarily within Muslim territories, known as the *Dār al-Islām* ('House of Islam'), which was contrasted with the non-Muslim *Dār al-Ḥarb* ('House of War') or *Dār al-Kufr* ('House of Unbelief'). In early Islam, this is perhaps best exemplified by scholars travelling to the holy sites of Islam to collect *ḥadīths* from famous transmitters. Travel as a way of 'conquering knowledge' was integral to the scholar's formal training through instruction from recognized authorities and their endorsement in the form of a written permission (known as *ijāza*), to teach their works.<sup>1</sup> *ʿIlm* (knowledge) as social and cultural capital bestowed status and ensured recognition, which could be 'translated' in paid employment, as a teacher or scribe. More importantly, in a society that set great store

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<sup>1</sup> Houari Touati, *Islam and travel in the Middle Ages*, trans. by Lydia Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 97.

by lineage, there was a ‘dynastic’ dimension as status was passed down to the next generations.<sup>2</sup> To borrow Lévi-Strauss’ words, the Muslim scholars’ journey ‘occurred simultaneously in space, in time and in the social hierarchy.’<sup>3</sup> In addition, many of the geographer-travellers were driven by Wanderlust as much as by science, as al-Ya<sup>c</sup>qūbī (d. 897) stated in the preface to his *Kitāb al-Buldān* (‘Book of Countries’):

In the prime of my youth [...] I had an interest in knowing the news of countries and the distances that separate one town from another, because I travelled uninterruptedly from my childhood onwards and my exile continued.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Traders’ and Pilgrims’ Accounts***

The earliest account of non-Muslim lands can be dated to the mid-ninth century, and was entitled *Akhbār al-Šīn wa ‘l-Hind* (‘News of China and India’). It combined practical information about these far-flung corners of the known world with wondrous tales (‘*ajā’ib*’) redolent of the *Arabian Nights*, which emerged in the same period. The part on China is almost devoid of the mythical, and thus clearly had a different readership, consisting of traders who needed practical information, not myths. Besides the first descriptions of tea, porcelain and Confucian ethics, it provides often detailed ethnographic comments regarding gender relations, toilet habits, or the treatment of Muslim traders. More importantly, the comments tend to be factual and in some cases

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Berkey: *The formation of Islam: religion and society in the Near East, 600-1800* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 224ff.

<sup>3</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques*, trans. by J. & D. Weightmann (New York: Atheneum, 1974), p. 85.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Ya<sup>c</sup>qūbī, *Kitāb al-buldān*, ed. by M. J. de Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1860), p. 2.

even admiring; the foreign is worthy of interest and is approached in a detached, rather than judgmental fashion.

The embassy from the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad to the court of the Volga Bulghar in 921 gave rise to the very first Arabic travelogue, written by Ibn Faḍlān. The work already contained many of the elements that typify the *riḥla* in centuries to come. Combining travel and autobiography, the author-traveller intervened as an individual, thus combining a ‘collection of observation [... with] a record of private experience, an autobiographical account of a man pursuing an adventure.’<sup>5</sup> The itinerary imposed the structure and rhythm of the travelogue, as the traveller provides almost a day-to-day account of his progress, and events are linked to places. Although dates are infrequently used, the period between stages marks events both temporally and spatially. The introduction includes praise to God and the ruler or patron, the reason for the trip, and preparations for the journey. Fellow travellers generally remain ‘hidden’ and anonymous; they do not intervene in the travel experience, which is the preserve of the observer and actor, i.e. the narrator. The traveller journeys – or writes – not as a member of an ethnic or regional group, but as a Muslim.

Until the nineteenth century, the history of the *riḥla* was mainly a product of North Africa (*Maghrib*) and al-Andalus (Muslim-controlled Spain). The predominant sub-genre was related to the pilgrimage (*ḥajj*) to the Hijaz (the western part of the Arabian Peninsula), and has thus become known as the *riḥla ḥajjiyya* or *ḥijāziyya*. In addition to the pilgrimage, there was the prestige to be gained by Maghribi scholars from visiting the mythical centres of learning in the East (*Mashriq*), Damascus, Baghdad and Cairo. As a result, scholars meticulously listed details about teachers they

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<sup>5</sup> Ross Dunn, ‘International Migration of Literate Muslims in the Later Middle Period: the case of Ibn Battuta’, *Seek Knowledge. Thought and travel in the House of Islam*, ed. by Ian Netton (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1993), pp. 75-85 (p. 75).

encountered and places they visited, especially those of religious interest, such as mosques or saints' tombs. This travel paradigm ran along well-traced ley lines of the faith and study; the epistemic journey of the travellers was a rite of passage in terms of their relationship with the faith and the Muslim community at large, the *umma*.<sup>6</sup>

The man who may be called the father of the pilgrimage *riḥla* was the Valencia-born Ibn Jubayr (1145-1217), who made several trips to the East, but chronicled only his first (1183-1185). One of the most interesting features of his travelogue is the inclusion of both Christian and Muslim calendar dates, a practice which would not be repeated until the nineteenth century. It provides further proof of the Muslim perception – and acceptance – of the bicultural nature of the Mediterranean space within which they moved. Ibn Jubayr was a keen observer and provided abundant ethnographic information on the places he visited. His simple narrative prose, interspersed with poetry, has served as a model for *riḥlas* up until the present day. Like Ibn Fadlān, Ibn Jubayr came into close contact with the infidel, but his reactions defy preconceptions. On the one hand, the devout Muslim, whose pilgrimage was atonement for having drunk wine (albeit at the instruction of his ruler) was wary of passing too favourable a judgement on anything Christian, lest it tainted his faith. So, the reader is told to 'beware of entering their [sc. Christian] lands', and 'mixing with the pigs.'<sup>7</sup> Yet, they come in for praise, too, as Muslims often received kinder treatment at the hands of Christian rulers than they did from other Muslims.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, his admiration for the Mashriq is regularly tested by the behaviour of

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<sup>6</sup> Although women took part in the hajj, they remained conspicuous by their absence in the *riḥla ḥajjiyya*. None of the travellers mentioned any female companions, and while there are several known accounts of the pilgrimage by both Indian and Iranian female Muslim travellers in the pre-modern period (the earliest going as far back as 1692), no Arabic accounts seem to have come down to us.

<sup>7</sup> Roland Broadhurst, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952), 119, 322.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

the inhabitants of the holy sites who have ‘loosen[ed] the ties of Islam’ and are interested only in ‘dispossessing the pilgrims of their property.’<sup>9</sup>

Travel was highly dangerous; at sea, there was the threat of enslavement at the hands of pirates, or of shipwreck (which happened to Ibn Jubayr on the way home). On land, travellers had to contend with other challenges, best summarised by the geographer al-Muqaddasī (d. 991), who recounted how he got lost in the desert, was forced to eat non-halal food, almost drowned several times, was thrown in jail because he was considered a spy, braved hot sandstorms and snow, survived numerous murder plots, and was stripped of his possessions umpteen times.<sup>10</sup>

In the second half of the thirteenth century a variant emerged in which the emphasis veered away from geographical and ethnographic descriptions, in favour of the prosopographical. Here, lists of scholars met by the author and/or (past and present) residents in the places they visited, books read, and *ijāzas* obtained, were liberally larded with sententious poetry. The destination hardly mattered, nor did the journey; it was about the aggrandizement of the traveller’s scholarly capital and prestige through a cornucopia of references and quotations.

The most famous Arab traveller in history, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (1304-1377), departed his native Tangier at the beginning of June 1325, and only returned after nearly a quarter of a century (and two pilgrimages) of travelling across the globe, including China, Sumatra, Ceylon and the Maldives. In a further twist, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s account was ‘ghosted’ by a scholar by the name of Ibn Juzayy, which has, naturally, given rise to speculation and doubts regarding the content of the *riḥla*. Besides unacknowledged borrowings from, for instance, Ibn Jubayr, the scribe sometimes becomes visible in

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>10</sup> al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm fī maʿrifat al-aqālīm*, ed. by M. J. de Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1906), p. 44.

the text. In a discussion on Basra and its brackish water being due to the fact that it comes from the Persian Gulf, the following is inserted: ‘Ibn Juzayy says: ‘it is because of this that the air in Basra is not good and the complexion of its people yellowish and sickly, which has become proverbial.’’<sup>11</sup> Gaining a reputation as a perceptive reporter and raconteur, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s name has become a byword for both a seasoned traveller and a fantasist.

Subsequent pilgrimage *riḥlas* tended to plough the furrow of Ibn Jubayr. Early on, the itineraries tended to be fixed, but the length of journeys varied considerably, from an average of one year to many decades. Travelogues were often written a long time after travelling; al-Balawī (d. 1365) took almost twenty years to complete the record of his five-year journey to the Mashriq in 1335. Quite naturally, this implied a reprocessing of the experience, compounded in some cases by the use of a scribe. The amount of detail that was often included meant that authors must have relied on notes, as well as memory. The travelogues often used many other sources, such as historical chronicles, geographical manuals, or earlier travellers, even though they were not always acknowledged. In some cases, references were more than likely added when the author had access to his library, while others travelled with key works. After discussing essential tools, including needle and thread, to take for emergencies along the way, al-Ṭayyib (d. 1756) added that: ‘a knowledgeable person will also take what he needs in terms of books in all branches of knowledge.’<sup>12</sup>

### ***The Age of Ambassadors and Priests***

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<sup>11</sup> Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Tuḥfat al-nuẓẓār fī gharāʾib al-amṣār wa ʿajāʾib al-asfār*, ed. by M. A. al-ʿAryān & M. al-Qaṣṣāṣ (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-ʿUlūm, 1987), I, p. 200.

<sup>12</sup> Salah Al-Dihan, ‘Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib, *Riḥla ilā ʿl-Hijāz*. Critical edition of Muhammad al-Tayyib’s manuscript “Travel to Hijāz” (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Salford, 2003), II, p. 63.

The seventeenth century saw a number of developments in the *riḥla* literature, in terms of authorship and destination, with, for the first time, a number of travelogues relating to journeys to European states. Shifts in the power balance in the Mediterranean in the fifteenth century, not least due to the Reconquista, led to increased contacts – both commercial and diplomatic – between European and North African states, several of which had resident European consuls as early as the sixteenth century. The first account of a diplomatic mission to Europe was written by a Moroccan of Andalusian descent, Ibn Qāsim al-Ḥajarī (d. 1645), who travelled to France and the Low Countries (1611-3) to negotiate a treaty on behalf of the Moroccan sultan. Moroccan envoys were also sent to Europe to ransom Muslim captives; al-Wazīr al-Ghassānī went to Spain (1690-1), whereas al-Miknāsī chronicled two such missions (Spain, 1779-80; Malta, Naples and Sicily, 1781-3).

The travel experience of these ambassadors could not be more different from that of their pilgrim counterparts. For a start, they journeyed towards the ‘House of War’, which was highly problematic; not only was this censured by Islamic law, but it also necessitated close-quarter contact with Christians and unreligious practices (e.g. alcohol, absence of halal food). Secondly, in many cases it involved travel to formerly Muslim territory and constant reminders of the ignominy of Christian conquest. Thirdly, the information gleaned often came mediated through a third party, as the delegations were given an interpreter, usually a Levantine cleric. Finally, even though the format of the ambassadorial *riḥlas* was similar to the pilgrimage travelogues, the former had a purely official intent, and a very limited distribution within court circles.

Travellers in this period felt compelled to preface their *riḥlas* with a ‘disclaimer’, explaining their reasons for travelling to Europe, in order to pre-empt



accusations of interest in heathen matters and people. The usual preliminary apotropaic formulae thus took on an additional dimension. Experiences were viewed through a prism of not just an encounter with the foreign, but with Christianity, onto which the humiliation of the Reconquista was projected. There was a disgust with all things Christian, while Spain was consistently referred to as *al-‘aduwa* (‘the enemy’), its king ‘the despot’ (*tāghiya*). Whenever mentioning a town formerly held by Muslims, the authors prayed ‘God restore it to Islam!’ (*a<sup>c</sup>ādahā Allāh dār al-Islām*). There was dishonour in the present, too, as the envoys were there to liberate Muslim captives. The relatively new practice of quarantine was also resented as a sign of Christian power, and al-Miknāsī refused confinement in the lazaretto, preferring, instead, to remain on his ship.

The sense of humiliation is bound up with another key aspect of the Moroccan ambassadorial accounts. Their principal quest is not for personal recognition or ‘soft capital’, but for signs of Muslim and regal power, both past and present. So, there are numerous references to the respect with which envoys are treated, thus conveying the importance of their ruler and, of course, by extension, the *umma*. Al-Ghassānī reported that the Spanish king ‘often asked questions about our Master, al-Manṣūr billāh, and as he mentioned his name, he doffed the sombrero (*al-shumrūrū*) he was wearing, as a sign of respect and esteem.’<sup>13</sup>

When discussing areas once under Muslim control, authors’ attention focused on the lost glory of historical Muslim elements. Though Christian dogma and practices elicited opprobrium, the envoys related reasonably well to Christians on an interpersonal level, and found many favourable characteristics (e.g. cleanliness, kindness, charity). They faithfully recorded all aspects of European societies they visited, with special

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<sup>13</sup> Muhammad al-Ghassānī, *Rihlat al-wazīr fī iftikāk al-asīr*, ed. by Nūrī al-Jarrāḥ (Abu Dhabi: Dār al-Suwaydī li ‘l-Nashr wa ‘l-Tawzī‘, 2002), pp. 70, 84.

interest in their hosts' military capability as the sultan eagerly awaited information about defences, weaponry, shipbuilding, and naval infrastructure.

When it came to social practices, it was gender relations and sexual mores that attracted travellers' attention. Though shocked at the commingling of men and women and the absence of male jealousy, the Arab visitors were not immune to the charms of Christian women. Al-Ḥajarī had a romantic affair with a French woman, while a lovesick al-Miknāsī composed amorous poetry for an opera singer in Naples.

There is overwhelming evidence to gainsay the formerly accepted orthodoxy, most famously propounded by Bernard Lewis, that prior to the nineteenth century Muslims showed no interest in the outside non-Muslim (European) world.<sup>14</sup> However, one should be wary of interpreting the favourable comments as a recommendation to adopt the inventions and wonders they observed, not merely because of the above-mentioned fear of being branded an infidel, but also to avoid the displeasure of the ruler.

Whereas Muslim travellers were constantly reminded that they were in enemy, 'infidel' country, there was another group of travellers in this period, namely Levantine clerics, whose journey was one of integration in the Christian oecumene. Here, too, piety often coincided with knowledge, and many of the travellers received their clerical training in Rome. The link with the seat of Western Christianity also explains the fact that of the seven known extant Levantine travelogues, four involved journeys to Italy. Two ventured much further afield: the Patriarch of Damascus, Makarius, travelled to Slav lands (Wallachia, Moldova, Ukraine, Muscovy) in 1655-1659 in order to raise funds for his congregation, and the Iraqi priest, Ilyās Ibn Ḥannā

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<sup>14</sup> Bernard Lewis, 'The use by Muslim historians of non-Muslim sources', in *Historians of the Middle East*, ed. by B. Lewis & P. M. Holt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 180-191 (p. 181).

al-Mawṣulī, produced the first Arabic account of a lengthy stay in Central and South America (1668-1683).

Just like the Muslim pilgrimage *riḥlas*, Christian travellers' itineraries contained a recognized set of religious sites (particularly churches), which are often described in great detail, as are feasts and festivals. Linguistically, the Christian travellers' accounts stand out, mainly through the informal style and often abundant use of dialectisms, which contrasted with the literary features of most of the Muslim *riḥlas*. As there was no established readership for the Christian travelogues, they very quickly receded into oblivion.

### ***The Arab Renaissance***

Arabic travel literature really came into its own as a literary genre in the nineteenth century, not least due to the increased dissemination through the introduction of printing in the Arab world, and the expansion of infrastructure facilitating travel. In addition to the number of works, the destinations, too, grew exponentially; Europe, in particular, figured prominently in the collective consciousness as the 'New World'. Contact with the West often occurred through military conflict, starting with Napoleon's short-lived Egyptian campaign (1798-1801), which was followed by full-blown colonisation in Algeria (1830), Tunisia (1881) and Egypt (1881). The significant political, societal and cultural changes in the region laid the foundations for the modern Middle East. As it came after an era of relative decline, the nineteenth century became known as the *Nahḍa* ('Renaissance'), in which travel literature occupied a unique position since it became a primary source of inquiry into Western progress and, thus, a major conduit of modernity.

Muslim rulers in the Arab world, as well as those in Turkey and Iran, turned to Europe for assistance with their modernization schemes. Besides inviting foreign advisors, Muslims were for the first time being sent to the *Dār al-Kufr* for study. The most famous mission left Egypt for France in 1826 and involved over forty students. It was the imam of the group, Rifāʿa al-Ṭaḥṭāwī (1801-1872), who chronicled his five-year stay in the first printed *riḥla* on Europe. It remains one of the most extensive ever written, combining travel journal with manual for the new sciences and technologies, as well as geography and ethnography. The broad sweep of subjects made al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's *riḥla* eminently suitable as a textbook, and the Egyptian ruler, Muḥammad `Alī Pasha, had it distributed to his civil servants and students at the new schools. It was translated in Turkish the year after it was published in Arabic and sent to the Ottoman Sultan in Constantinople, where it was equally avidly read.

For the first time, a wide Arabic readership, from Morocco to Iraq, was introduced to concepts ranging from parliamentary democracy and revolution to European table etiquette. From the outset, the aim was clear:

to observe in great detail everything that would take place on this trip, everything I saw and encountered that was strange and wondrous, and to write it down so that it could be useful to discover the face of this region, of which it is said that it is the bride among all regions, and in order for it to remain a guide for travellers wishing to go there.<sup>15</sup>

The introduction contained elements which would figure prominently in other travelogues of the century, such as the religious endorsement of travel in general, with

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel Newman, *An Imam in Paris* (London: Saqi Books, 2011), pp. 104-5.

the author, pledging to: ‘approve only that which does not run counter to the prescriptions of Muhammadan law.’<sup>16</sup> Even later authors felt compelled to include this type of disclaimer. Writing in the 1880s, the Tunisian reformer Bayram V specified that travel to the *Dār al-Ḥarb* ‘is allowed if it is in the personal and general interest, but is to be condemned if it is done only in pursuit of trade and the vanities of the world.’<sup>17</sup>

In total, some forty-eight travellers left over sixty accounts of journeys to a wide variety of destinations in Europe – and beyond, including Brazil, Russia and the United States of America. France topped the list as it was thought to be the embodiment of the modern West, crystallizing all that was admired in Europe. No travelogue was considered complete without a visit to Paris. Just as in the past Western Muslims’ journeys to the East were an obligatory rite of scholarly passage, a visit to Europe became a mark of modernity and the coping stone of a modern education. For Muslim rulers, a visit to Europe became part of a narration of Muslim power and several of them left accounts to mark the occasion. While the Tunisian Bey and the Sultan of Zanzibar, who, respectively, visited France (1846) and England (1875) entrusted this to amanuenses, the Persian Shah Nāṣir al-Dīn (1848-1896) kept detailed journals of his journeys to Europe.

The pilgrimage of Modernity had its own itinerary, landmarks and shrines, such as libraries or the theatre. The technological inventions on display at the World Exhibitions were the object of no fewer than fourteen accounts. These events offered an unusual insight into the projection of the Self by the Other as Arab travellers were confronted with Orientalist recreations of their homeland, complete with imported

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 105-6.

<sup>17</sup> Muḥammad Bayram V, *Ṣafwat al-ʿtibār bi-mustawda` al-amṣār wa'l-aqṭār* (Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Iʿlāmiyya, 1884-93), I, p. 15.

natives. Yet, this aspect was all but ignored in favour of endless descriptions of wondrous new machines and industries.

Several travellers produced multiple accounts of visits to Europe, and although travel diaries constituted the largest subgenre, many of the texts were hybrids, with elements of political geography, ethnography and historiography. The reasons for travel varied in the course of the century, as perceptions of Europe changed, from the exotic to the threatening, and Western influence in the Arab world grew. Muḥammad al-Muwaylīḥī (1858-1930), who spent several years in Europe, divided Egyptian travellers into several categories: students who were taken in by appearances; tourists seeking entertainment and recreation, and who only wanted to see for themselves what others had written about, or impress their compatriots with the wonders they had seen there; government officials, who went there for study or tourism; and those who sought knowledge and made a careful examination of things (but unfortunately ended up being ‘turned’ by the West).<sup>18</sup>

America for the first time entered the Arab consciousness and, to some degree, became part of ‘the West’ towards the end of the period. It was, once again, the World Exhibitions that drew travellers, with the Egyptian Adwār Ilyās and the Lebanese Khalīl Sarkīs visiting those in Philadelphia (1876) and Chicago (1893), respectively. However, in both cases, their visit to the United States was secondary to their European journeys, to which they devoted most of their attention.

In addition to representing both preconceived and actuated images, the literature says as much, if not more, about the travellers’ own societies. Although the awe for all things European of the early travelogues gave way to more critical views, there remained much to be admired, but authors remained reluctant to promote the adoption of Western

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<sup>18</sup> M. al-Muwaylīḥī, *Ḥadīth ʿĪsā Ibn Hishām* (Cairo: n.p., n.d.), pp. 216-7.

creations at home. The inevitable corollary to the European technological and material superiority was that the Muslim world was backward and travellers tended to deal with this by underscoring Arab-Muslim morality and virtues, – areas in which Europe was considered to be sorely lacking –, as well as the past achievements of Arab-Islamic culture and the debt owed to it by Europe.

European women as a trope for the immorality of the Christian West continued to run through the (pre-)modern Arabic *riḥlas*. Some authors praised the freedom women enjoyed in Europe, but none – not even the Christians – thought it appropriate for their own countries. European men, for their part, were taken to task for their lack of jealousy and submission to the whims of their women. Arab women, for their part, remained invisible in the travel literature.<sup>19</sup>

There were some noteworthy differences between travellers from the East and those from North Africa (Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia). Like in preceding centuries, Moroccan travelogues chronicled embassies, and the views expressed were surprisingly similar. These were not awe-struck travellers lavishing praise on Western progress; interest in European technology and inventions tended to be focused on military hardware, and then only in order to destroy the infidels. But things were not all bad: Idrīs al-Salawī (1876) was impressed by English women working alongside men in factories and workshops, and al-<sup>c</sup>Amrāwī's visit to a printing works in France in 1860 led to him praying that his ruler would have one soon.

As inhabitants of France's oldest Arab colony, the Algerians came to Europe at the behest of their foreign rulers, who realized the propaganda potential. The travelogues were printed at the government press and, in a bizarre twist, were translated into French

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<sup>19</sup> This excludes the *Memoirs* by the Omani princess Salmā Bint Sa<sup>c</sup>īd (who became known as Emily Ruete after settling in Germany with her husband) as these were originally written in German (1886).

to bolster support for the occupation in France. The ‘colonial’ *riḥla* paradigm was predicated in a quest for recognition of allegiance to the colonial ruler and Self-positioning within modernity.<sup>20</sup> The title of Ould Qāḍī’s travelogue, for instance, left little to the imagination as regards his aims: ‘al-Qāḍī’s Journey in Praise of France and for The Enlightenment of The Bedouin People’.<sup>21</sup>

The body of Christian Arab travel literature grew considerably, too, with no fewer than ten authors (out of twenty-six), all of them from the Levant.<sup>22</sup> Their works show many similarities with those of Muslim travellers, but there was an added dimension; their Europe was a metaphor for Christianity, welcoming its long-lost brethren with open arms. At the same time, the works of Christian authors reveal pride in their Arab roots, emphasizing the nation (*waṭan*), as opposed to the *umma*.

The genre reveals salient traces of epistemological meditation on the hermeneutics of space – usually broken down into constituent sites – as a text or script to be read, as well as added to, generating a palimpsest of movement, both temporal and spatial. The Europe in Arabic travel literature was a composite, within which merged the (semi-)mythical Europe of progress, industry and science with the Europe of wonders. The importance of the travel accounts lies not just in how nineteenth-century Arabs saw Europe (the perception of the Other), but also in the way Europe saw itself and the image it conveyed of itself to the outside world (the perception and projection of the Self). In this respect, Arab visitors conveyed the West’s image of its superiority and,

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<sup>20</sup> D. Newman, “‘Hell for horses, paradise for women’: power and identity in 19th-century North African Travel Literature’, in *Travel, Agency, and the Circulation of Knowledge*, ed. by Gesa Mackenthun, Andrea Nicolas & Stefanie Wodianka (Münster: Waxmann, 2016), pp. 183-200.

<sup>21</sup> Aḥmad Ould Qāḍī, *al-Riḥla al-Qāḍiyya fī Maḍḥ Faransa wa Tabṣīr Ahl al-Bādiyya* (Algiers: Imprimerie Officielle, 1878), p. 33.

<sup>22</sup> See D. Newman, “Myths and realities in Muslim Alterist discourse : Arab travellers in Europe in the age of the Nahda (19th c.)”, *Chronos*, 6 (2002), pp. 7-76.



by implication, the inferiority of non-European societies in general, and those of Muslim states, in particular. It is this view that would continue to loom large in the next period.

### ***The Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries***

The twentieth century saw a number of dramatic changes in Arabic travel writing as regards destinations, motive, style and authorship. Many of the changes were, as before, driven by reaction to conflict. The first of these was Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, which reverberated across the Muslim world. The country's modernization programme was held up as an example by Muslim reformers and nationalists, many of whom harboured hopes of a Muslim Japan joining the Ottoman Empire in the struggle against Western/Christian encroachments.

It is against this backdrop that ʿAlī al-Jirjāwī left his native Egypt to attend the 1907 World Congress of Religions in Tokyo. The mission had a pan-Islamist dimension as the aim was to spread Islam in Japan. The descriptions of Japanese history and society highlight the country's technological advances, as well as its deep historical roots. Comparisons with the author's own nation abound, whether in terms of architectural skills, patriotism, and the virtue of their women. As for the Emperor, he was not only a champion of modernity, but also embodied the virtues associated with Muslim heroes of the past. The most interesting section of the book deals with the author's missionary campaign, whose success relied on 'the natural state of the Japanese which is highly conducive to embracing Islam because they are a people with a natural propensity to accept all that conforms to intellect and to reject everything that runs counter to it.'<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> ʿA. al-Jirjāwī, *al-Rihla al-Yābāniyya* (Cairo: Jarīdat al-Irshād, 1908), p. 118.

Until World War II, travel remained the preserve of intellectuals and the elite, and tourism became the main reason for travel. Travellers' origins mirrored those of the previous century, as Egyptian and Levantine authors continued to dominate; it would take until the second half of the century for Gulf authors (mainly from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) to appear on the scene. There was a shift in religious affiliation as the contribution by Christian Arab travellers all but faded, and the *riḥla* once again became the preserve of Muslim authors.

The most famous travel writer in the first half of the century was the Egyptian secondary-school teacher Muḥammad Thābit, who put his summer holidays to good use. In the course of two decades (1926-1946), he covered some 200,000 miles, travelling from Europe to the Far East, from Africa to Afghanistan, to the Americas and, finally, Australia and Hawaii, producing a total of eight travelogues. The first to write about many of the places he visited (e.g. Australia, Hawaii), Thābit took his educational role very seriously and provided his readership with a multitude of geographical, historical and ethnological facts, as well as a multitude of photographs. There are some interesting differences in the treatment of Muslim and non-Muslim countries; in the former, he was most interested in the past and how it had survived, if at all, and, especially, in religious attitudes and practices.

In the aftermath of the Second World War and the subsequent decolonization movement, another strand manifested itself in travel literature to the West as the travelogue sometimes became a tool in the anti-imperialist struggle. The main target was the USA, which replaced Europe as the centre of education and modernity. The first example – and still one of the most excoriating accounts on America – was *Amrīkā allatī ra'aytu* ('The America I Have Seen') by the Egyptian Islamist Sayyid Quṭb (1906-1966). Based on his two-year study stay in Colorado (1948-50), it encapsulated some variations on the nineteenth-century paradigm, with a number of

prominent tropes remaining very much in evidence, such as (Western) ‘immorality’, ‘women’, ‘progress’, and ‘irreligiousness’ – albeit now viewed through the prism of imperialism. Quṭb was arguably the first to draw a cartoonishly clichéd image of America, and by extension the West, that has perdured to the present day.

During the latter half of the century the travelogue became increasingly intertwined with autobiography, social and political commentary. This was in no small measure linked to the increasing number of Arab expatriates, whose experience in Western society was fundamentally different from that of their predecessors. In addition to the imperialist question, Arabic travel writing became increasingly dominated by the relationship between the Muslim world and the West, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, more recently, the perceived link between Arabs/Islam and terrorism, and Islamophobia. The problems of Muslim expatriate communities are the focus of the Saudi travel writer, Muḥammad al-ʿAbbūdī, who has been crisscrossing the globe since the 1980s, resulting in over 120 travel books.

The growing body of travel literature produced by those settled in the West offers addresses the highly complex issues of identity, as well as the politics of displacement, exile, alienation, belonging and exclusion. The most interesting aspect of these works is the fragmentation of ‘the Other’, as authors negotiate the Western and multifarious immigration spaces. This genre often sits comfortably on the cusp of autobiography and fiction; on the former end of the spectrum one finds *ʿIrāqī fī Bārīs* (‘An Iraqi in Paris, 2005) by Samūʿīl Shamʿūn, one of the few Christian authors. The fictional end includes a number of novels with Arab travellers/exiles as their protagonists (and authors), such as Alaa Al Aswany’s *Chicago* (2007) and Mirāl al-Tahāwī’s *Brooklyn Heights* (2012).

The events of 11 September 2001 marked a watershed in the perception and treatment of Arabs and Muslims, which travellers experienced first-hand; often, it becomes the prism through which they viewed the journey. The Saudi reformist (and sometime President of the Islamic Association of North America) Muḥammad al-Aḥmarī devotes a great deal of attention to the status of long-standing Arab communities in the United States and the question of Muslim versus American identity. He attributes the rising Islamophobia to pro-Zionist elements in the media, while decision-makers ‘craft anti-Muslim and anti-Arab policies and laws against the American people’ under pressure from the Jewish lobby.<sup>24</sup> That is not to say that this type of literature is reduced to mere diatribes against the wicked West; far from it. The critical comments about Western society and politics contrast with very favourable descriptions of its culture, individual encounters and respect towards the Other.

The single biggest innovation in this period was the emergence of women’s travel literature, which usually dealt with journeys to the West (particularly the USA) for study purposes. Arab female travellers are also overwhelmingly Muslim, with the exception of the Egyptian Copt Karīma Kamāl (*Bint Miṣriyya fī Amrīkā*, ‘An Egyptian Girl in America’, 1993). The first of these travellers was the Egyptian Jādhibiyya Ṣidqī, who in the early 1960s published *Amrīkā wa Anā* (‘America and I’). The women’s accounts often address the same issues as those of their male counterparts, and tend to share their views, even with regard to Western women. Similar to twentieth-century Western travel literature, Arabic travel texts ‘as ethnography or social commentary’ transcend ‘gender boundaries [...] and male and

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<sup>24</sup> *Ayyām bayna Shīkāghū wa Bārīs. Riḥla ba‘da aḥdāth 11 aylūl* (‘Days between Chicago and Paris; Journey after the events of 11 September’, Riyadh: Maktabat al-‘Abīkān, 2005), pp. 25-6.

female travellers have written self-reflexive texts that defy easy categorisation as autobiography, memoir, or travel account.<sup>25</sup>

Some, like the Moroccan Laylā Abū Zayd's *Amrīkā: al-wajh al-ākhar* ('America: The Other Side', 1986) concentrated on the ills of America (media, poverty, education). Others took a more measured approach, such as Raḍwā ʿĀshūr's chronicle of her student days in the 1970s, which wonderfully captures the Zeitgeist. This is how she described watching the fall of Saigon in the student common room:

For us, [...] the sons and daughters of the world under the imperialist yoke, this was not a story of liberation but of the raising of the revolutionaries' banner over Saigon. Merely joyful news peddled by news agencies and which made [the people's] aspirations come true. In fact, the thing that concerned us and formed the core of our stories, histories and futures was the assurance that [...] the banner of imperialism had fallen and that we had seen how!<sup>26</sup>

In 1986, the Egyptian physician, feminist and political activist Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī published *Riḥlātī fī l-ʿālam* ('My Travels around the world'), which covers her travels in the 1960s and 1970s to a number of destinations both within the Arab world (Algeria, Jordan) and without (France, USA, Finland, USSR, Iran, India, Thailand, Kenya, Ethiopia and Senegal). In addition to being the only travelogue by a female author to cover a multitude of countries, al-Saʿdāwī's work also stands out by its focus on subjects that figure prominently in her other works: colonialism, imperialism, women's rights, poverty, health-care education and racism.

<sup>25</sup> Susan Basnett, 'Travel writing and gender', in Peter Hulme & Tim Youngs, pp. 225-241 (p. 225).

<sup>26</sup> R. ʿĀshūr, *Al-Riḥla: Ayyām ṭāliba Miṣriyya fī Amrīkā* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbūlī, 1987), pp. 156-7.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that al-Sa<sup>c</sup>dāwī is one of the few Arab travellers to discuss racial segregation in America, which she experienced first-hand during her stay in North Carolina:

The toilet in the club had two doors. On one was written, for whites, on the other, for coloureds. I stood in front of the mirror to check the colour of my skin – I did not know which of the doors to enter. I went through the ‘coloureds’ door.<sup>27</sup>

Race is a key theme in the book, and is often linked to Western colonialism, though things are not always clear-cut, as she suffers discrimination by an African stewardess, who kowtowed to white passengers but ignored al- Sa<sup>c</sup>dāwī.<sup>28</sup> After witnessing an official at Cairo airport swearing at an Egyptian woman and spitting on her passport, al-Sa<sup>c</sup>dāwī remarks: ‘I felt alienated in my homeland, and outside it I also felt like a stranger. We were still living in the age of slavery.’<sup>29</sup>

She noted the similarities between African Americans and the Egyptian poor, especially in education and health care, and was horrified that conditions at the Harlem hospital were far worse even than the ones she saw at the hospital she worked at in Cairo. The Other in al-Sa<sup>c</sup>dāwī’s work is often the dispossessed, the ‘non-aligned’ in the parlance of the time, whose cause she champions, whether it be the tea-pickers in India or the Tashkent peasant. Underlying all of this is an insatiable quest for knowledge, and profound interest in, as well as affection for the Other, whomever they may be.

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<sup>27</sup> Sylvia Eber, *Nawal El Saadawi. My Travels around the world* (London: Methuen, 1991), pp. 35-6.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.